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ABSTRACT

Noting that at Saint Mary's University (where the authors teach) the issue of spirituality is in the forefront of education and is seamlessly woven into required courses throughout four years of college in an attempt to "enhance students' spiritual and personal lives," this paper positions writing centers as a place for student inquiries about their spirituality. The paper states that one avenue of spiritual study is through the University's Interdisciplinary Program, a required course sequence intended to address the theme of understanding the human condition--students and faculty in this core curriculum are considered co-learners who value discussion, in-depth analysis, questioning, and critical thinking. It explains that central to these courses are writing assignments that serve the purposes of using writing as a tool for learning as well as helping students learn to write. According to the paper, however, almost 20% of students believe they cannot meet assignment requirements and be true to their own spirituality. The paper reports that writing center faculty notice that conflicts arise when students who do not follow Christian traditions must write about Christian topics and when some traditional students feel they must reveal too much of their souls, as in "too personal" writing. If the writing center is to meet students' needs brought about by the University's expectations of requiring spiritually based courses which emphasize writing, the center must reposition its approach to tutoring: it must move from a traditional format, which focuses on external assignments, to a non-traditional format, which emphasizes the process of learning how to convey internal spirituality to an external audience. It suggests using the "enneagram" (an aid for self-knowledge) as a tutor training strategy for strengthening the tutor/student conference experience through promoting tutor self-knowledge and empathy toward others. (NKA)

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by

Peggy Johnson and Mike Mutschelknaus

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Disembodied Spirituality: Conflicts in the Writing Center

In her introduction to *Our Little Secret: A History of Writing Centers* (February, 1999), Elizabeth Boquet provides several varied interpretations of writing centers: a place where secrets are imparted from wise tutors to receptive students; a space like a laundromat where students are dropped off, cleaned up, and picked up again; a temporality where methodological interactions between people occur over time; and a secret life where writing center faculty and tutors struggle not to divulge too much about the failures of faculty to students or the failures of students to faculty (463-464). Boquet suggests that, most importantly, writing centers be a place for playful inquiry:

> [The writing center] does away with the script for the how-to-write-research-paper session or the why-the-writing-center-does-not-constitute-plagiarism defense and insists on less predictable but potentially more productive conversations which wander, circle, and return again to the point where they began. This is not a failing; it is instead a part of the process, the nature of scholarly inquiry, and it is what we must engage in ourselves if we hope to model it for our students. (478-79)

In this presentation, we would like to position writing centers as a place for student inquiries about their spiritualities. We think Boquet would agree with our stance.

The issue of spirituality is at the forefront of education at Saint Mary's University, an issue that is, in fact, seamlessly woven into required courses throughout students' four years of college in an attempt to "enhance students' spiritual and personal lives" through the teaching of "faith, zeal, and service to society" (SMU mission statement).

One main avenue of spiritual study is through Saint Mary's University's Interdisciplinary Program, which is a required sequence of courses intended to address the theme of understanding the human condition. The courses seek answers to four of humankind's most basic questions: Who am I? Where do I come from? What is my relationship to the global community? and Where am I going? First year students are asked to reflect on the meaning of the self and their own sense of self in courses such as *Stories of God and the Human Condition* and *Cornerstone: Facets of Human and Personal Identity*. Sophomores address the question, Where do I come from? through their readings and discussion of great books of literature, philosophy, theology, and history in the required courses *Perspectives on the Good Human Life from Homeric Greece to the Early Middle Ages* and *Our Modern Heritage*. In the course entitled *Global Issues*, juniors confront the question, What is my relationship to the global community? by examining multi-cultural realities of various cultures throughout the world. The senior course *Capstone* addresses the question, Where am I going? through examining the historical origins of the American culture and how these origins affect our understanding of work, marriage and family life, and faith.

Students and faculty in this core interdisciplinary curriculum are considered co-learners who value discussion, in-depth analysis, questioning, and critical thinking; at the center of these courses are writing assignments that serve the purposes of using writing as a tool for learning as well as helping students learn to write, both of which, according to McLeod and Mainmon in their article "Clearing the Air: WAC Myths and Realities," are necessary in writing across the curriculum programs.

The writing center supports Saint Mary's University's commitment to "awaken, nourish and empower its community of learners to lives of service and leadership for God, society, and self" (SMU mission statement), and we believe the majority of students on campus support this commitment as well. In an informal campus survey, fully 90 percent of students defined themselves as very spiritual or moderately spiritual, and 65 percent believe writing about personal faith issues helps them to learn more about themselves. A struggle surfaces, however, when students believe the requirements of interdisciplinary writing assignments may be too narrow for their personal understanding of spirituality. According to the campus survey (Fall 2000), almost 20 percent of students believe they cannot meet assignment requirements and be true to their own spirituality. Almost a third of students surveyed said to some degree they change their portrayal of their spirituality in order to

fit the requirements of some interdisciplinary writing assignments; in other words, they make themselves appear more or less spiritual than they really are.

Currently at Saint Mary's University, students do not consider the writing center as a place for spiritual inquiry. For example, as writing center faculty, we notice that conflicts arise when students who do not follow Christian traditions--such as our Buddhist Vietnamese students, animist Hmong students, and Islamic Malaysian students--must write about Christian topics, such as redemption, for example. Chor, one of our Hmong students, for instance, found it difficult to describe the theological significance of his village's centering post in a *Stories of God and the Human Condition* assignment. According to Chor, his refugee community in Minnesota feels cut off and adrift because their centering post is so far away from them now, in the jungles of Laos. "English," Chor said, "doesn't have the words I need in order to describe it." As another example, Bo-s, one of our Hong Kong students, worried that writing about the many ancestral ghosts that inhabit his city might lower his grade in a course that focused on great ideas of Western humanism. "You Americans don't understand about ghosts," he told us, "because your country is too young to have any. People have been living in Hong Kong for thousands of years."

International and refugee students, however, are not the only ones who have conflicts when they write about spirituality. Our traditional students sometimes voice the concern that professors want them to include information that is "too personal" in their essays. They either have to reveal too much of their souls, or, if unwilling, create fake spiritual personas in order to get through the assignments. Chris, a student from a private high school in Chicago, explains the conundrum. "I shouldn't have to write all this

Catholic stuff in order to get A's in my courses, but that's what expected of me." Said Melissa, a senior, "I've been writing like I'm a Catholic for four years because I don't feel comfortable sharing my growing interest in Wicca with my professors."

What is the role of the writing center in this tension of autonomy and voice? As Gregory Shafer notes in his article "Negotiating Audience and Voice in the Writing Center," we must question if we are "truly doing our job if we censor the uninhibited writer simply because he doesn't fit into the narrow parameters of what has come to be called safe academic discourse" (221). We agree with Shafer that there is a need for writers to be heard, "to bring a piece of their lives, culture and social context into the writing they do" (221). Boquet's work suggests the same concept: that writing centers are places distinct from the classroom where students should feel secure in their expression of thoughts and ideas (470).

Therefore, our role as writing center faculty, who believe strongly in the LaSallian mission of our university, is to position ourselves as guides in the struggle that these students face in their production of work that not only reflects their own voices, but also meets the theological criteria of their assignments.

In order to discern where our position should be, we created an informal survey that we distributed last fall to 197 students in courses dealing with spiritual issues. The survey covered student attitudes towards spirituality, interdisciplinary courses, and--most importantly--the writing center's role in fostering spiritual development. The results, for us as writing center faculty, were initially disappointing. According to our survey, 63 percent of students were either neutral or not comfortable going to the writing center to

work on spiritual writing assignments, and 68 percent were either neutral or not comfortable sharing spiritual issues with writing center tutors.

Instead of being in the middle of the deep spiritual struggles our students face, we discovered that we, as a writing center, had been sidelined. Being benched is disappointing for us because Saint Mary's University is currently in the middle of WAC program development. We concur with Mcleod and Maimon that an involved writing center is critical for the success of a WAC initiative. According to them:

> A writing center is crucial. Students need audiences other than their peers in the classroom or their teacher to respond to their writing, and faculty need the assurance that when they assign writing in their classes, there will be a place on campus where knowledgeable tutors can respond to drafts of their students' writing. (581)

Our survey results showed that our writing center was not providing audiences for writing in spiritual courses or assuring faculty that there was a place on campus for students to go for effective tutoring on spiritual writing assignments.

As a result of our own soul-searching, we re-evaluated our tutor-training program with the following research questions in mind. First, what assumptions do tutors have about helping students with spiritual writing that silence those students? Second, how can we train tutors to recognize when students are beginning to develop spiritual voices? Finally, what kinds of dialogues must we model in order to help tutors learn how to assist others in exploring spiritual issues through writing?

We wanted our tutor-training program to overcome the dilemma that Nancy Welch describes so well in her 1999 CCC article "Playing With Reality: Writing Centers

After the Mirror Stage." According to Welch, "Ultimately, both arguments--for assimilation or for resistance--share the view that academic languages are inherently outside, other, and alienating.... [A student] can learn to accomplish or protest what's being asked of her in her weekly assignment[s], but she cannot fundamentally alter her relationship to [her] assignments" (56). We wanted to teach our tutors to help students avoid assimilating fake spiritualities into their writing and to help students avoid protesting that spiritual writing is not worthwhile.

In his 1999 article in Teaching English in the Two Year College, Shafer wrestles with a similar problem:

> Is it our job to assist students in becoming models of academic discourse, replete with properly placed commas and standard white English, or rather, is it our job to help them unleash the clamor and discord that rumbles inside their heads, a cacophony that can enliven their papers if it is allowed to become part of their discourse. (221-222)

We concur with Shafer, because student explorations in spirituality are unleashings of the "clamor and discord" that Shafer describes.

It is in this tension of clamor and discord, in what Welsh describes as the struggle between the "ideal and the real" (58), that students and tutors both begin to participate in the "fun of meaning" and "experience the zest of experimentation" (60). However, the student/tutor relationship does not fully engage in the zest of meaning and experimentation when the relationship focuses on spirituality. Many students at Saint Mary's University do not view writing center tutors as what Welsh calls "partners in the same dance" (60) when it comes to issues of spirituality. If the writing center successfully

provides a space that encourages a relationship of basic security and trust in tutoring situations that involve other personal identity papers, why does this security and trust break down when it comes to the issue of spiritual identity?

This breakdown may be attributed to student confusion between religion and spirituality; some professors may ask students to read, discuss, reflect and analyze theological texts while other professors may require students to engage in the meaning of their own personal spirituality. The struggle for students lies in sifting through a staggering amount of spiritual information to come to their own unique sense of higher truths, and once arriving at that, to be able to freely and confidently express that in writing assignments.

We believe this breakdown also occurs in part because other personal identity papers address parts of identity that are already developed, while spiritual identity papers ask students to define and reflect on a part of their identity that is still in flux. As Ronald Rolheiser claims in his text *The Holy Longing: The Search for a Christian Spirituality* (1999), most young people are caught up in a culture of individualism and indifference, and therefore have not grappled with theological or spiritual issues (113). Interdisciplinary courses and general education courses at Saint Mary's University require students to engage in the deep, universal questions of the human condition, but students may not be confident and secure that they've arrived at any substantive answers. But university professors require them to, at the least, participate in the struggle to answer these questions.

If the writing center is to meet student needs brought about by the university's external expectations of requiring spiritually based courses which emphasize writing, the

writing center must reposition its approach to tutoring: it must move from a traditional format, which focuses on external assignments, to a non-traditional format, which has as its emphasis the process of learning how to convey internal spirituality to an external audience.

Writing center tutoring, then, must focus on using writing to explore those depths. Through writing and prewriting activities as well as by asking questions that will lead students to discover their own voice, tutors must act to help guide students in the exploration of their inner spirituality; as a result, their own, unique voice will surface.

The strongest challenge in creating an atmosphere where student and tutor can safely and openly explore the depths of naming their personal spirituality comes in preparing tutors for the task of shifting from a traditional to a nontraditional approach to tutoring, from an external dialogue to an internal one. In order to successfully make this transition, we believe tutors must be engaged in the process of identifying their own spiritual voice before they can guide other students in their struggle to identify their unique spiritual voice.

We have relied upon the work of Father Richard Rohr to develop training that explores the inner search that can lead to spiritual dialogue, most notably his outstanding work on the enneagram as found in *Discovering the Enneagram: An Ancient Tool for a New Spiritual Journey* (1990).

Generally speaking, the enneagram is an aid for self-knowledge that is ancient, although Western cultures have discovered it only in our time. According to Rohr, many psychologists and theologians believe the enneagram is an excellent tool to help people reach intellectual and spiritual growth. The enneagram describes characteristics of nine

different personalities that bring into focus essential truths of our soul. In other words, the enneagram directly asks us to explore the questions, Who am I? and, How do I differ at the most basic level from others? Rohr believes working with the enneagram will help people become more aware of themselves as well as more understanding of other people.

The enneagram bases its types on nine "traps" or defense mechanisms that have been built up since early childhood and work to destroy our psyche, our relationship to God, and our interpersonal relationships. According to enneagram work done by the Franciscan Spirituality Center, these "nine faces of the soul" can be divided into three centers: the gut, heart, and head. "Gut" people act from a center that is immediate, spontaneous, and intuitive. "Heart" people act from a center that is social and emotional. "Head" people act from a center that is mental and self-preserving. In each person, one of the three areas dominates.

The enneagram can be successfully used as a tutor training strategy for strengthening the tutor/student conference experience through promoting tutor self-knowledge and empathy toward others. Coming to an awareness of one's personal weaknesses and strengths helps tutors not only to discover the workings of their inner self, but also to acknowledge the personal differences of others with whom they interact.

Using the training tool of the Enneagram has helped us as a writing center faculty to discover that we were initially too self-centered about our own roles as writing center leaders. Instead of helping our tutors and students with their spiritual issues, we were positioning the writing center's place in the university. Through the process of research and reflection, we have begun the process of repositioning our writing center as a place of spiritual and intellectual inquiry.

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